

Between Crises and Cooperation: The Future of Turkish-Israeli Relations

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ABSTRACT

Bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel nosedived after the recent Israeli operation in Gaza, and both countries tested each other's red lines at the height of the crisis from January to mid-February 2009. The verbal spat between Israeli President Shimon Peres and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at Davos and, later, an undiplomatic statement by the Israeli Ground Forces commander, Maj. Gen. Avi Mizrahi, led many observers to believe that the strategic relationship between Turkey and Israel had been dealt a fatal blow. However, diplomats and statesmen have already started mending diplomatic ties, while military cooperation between the two countries continued routinely. The latest crisis confirmed two oft-repeated conjectures regarding the pattern in bilateral ties: first, Turkey's partnership with Israel is fundamentally pegged to Israel's attitude toward the Palestinians, and, second, the profundity of the partnership has reached a level that makes a divorce quite complicated and difficult.

During Israel's recent operation against Hamas in Gaza, the so-called Operation Cast Lead which lasted from December 27, 2008 to January 18, 2009, Israeli-Turkish bilateral relations reached their lowest point since the early 1990s. Now that all the dust has settled, it is becoming clear that although the relationship did not touch bottom, it came dangerously close, particularly after the verbal spat between Israeli President Shimon Peres and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at Davos. When similar incidents took place over the last couple of years, for example when former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit called Israel's response to the Second Intifada "genocidal" in 2002, and Prime Minister Erdoğan accused Israel of committing "state terrorism" in 2004, diplomats on both sides always assured the international community and informed public opinion in Israel and Turkey that the strain on bilateral ties was

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only temporary and that relations would return to normal in the medium term. Indeed, Israelis, always at the receiving end of criticism emanating from Turkey in all such cases, made do with low profile protests behind doors and refrained from escalating the crises. Diplomats

and foreign policy commentators grew accustomed to reiterating the cliché that bilateral ties between Israel and Turkey could no longer be defined on the basis of strategic cooperation only, but had been diversified to a large extent to include the economy, culture, and tourism as well. The depth attained in all those areas, the argument went, would act as a cushion to soften the impact of occasional political differences of opinion between the Israeli and Turkish leadership.

The Lop-Sided Nature of Bilateral Ties

It is important at this point to consider Israel's traditionally meek response to Turkish criticisms and admonitions. Why have Israelis tended to act as the junior party in this bilateral relationship? The answer to this question should be sought at a number of levels. First is Israel's need for international legitimacy and recognition as an equal partner by its neighbors. Since Israel's foundation, Israeli governments have had to wrestle with the problem of diplomatic recognition, which was subject to the ebbs and flows of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Each new bout of conflagration between Israel and its Arab neighbors resulted in a recall of ambassadors and suspension of diplomatic ties by a host of African, Asian and Latin American countries. After the Yom Kippur War of 1973, for example, the number of countries that maintained diplomatic relations with the PLO nearly surpassed the number of foreign missions in Israel.¹ Israel managed to sign peace treaties with two of its numerous former enemies, namely Egypt and Jordan, but even in those cases the exchange of ambassadors did not raise the level of bilateral ties beyond a cold peace. Therefore, maintaining full diplomatic ties with Turkey, a Muslim country with international stature, is a top foreign policy objective from the Israeli point of view, an objective which is as vital as the tangible Israeli interest in cooperation with Turkey in other fields.

In addition, Israel attaches great value to its strategic partnership with Turkey at the military level. Military cooperation between Israel and Turkey is based on bilateral agreements and has received the blessing and active support of the US since the late 1990s. Several Israeli fighter planes train at the Konya Airbase in Turkey every year, and both countries conduct joint naval exercises with the participation

of American warships in the Mediterranean. As part of their strategic relationship, Turkey and Israel share intelligence; Israelis must particularly appreciate Turkish reports from regions that Israel finds difficult to reach, such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.

At the economic level, trade between Turkey and Israel reached unprecedented heights in the early 2000s. Turkey is one of the major customers for the Israeli arms industry, having spent hundreds of millions of dollars to date on finished products and renovation projects. Although Turkey has threatened several times to tie its purchase of Israeli arms and services to the resolution of regional and bilateral problems, Israel still counts on Turkey as a valued client. And while Israel seems to have abandoned the option of buying fresh water from Turkey, at least for now, another project on the table aims to link southern Turkey with an Israeli port city – via Northern Cyprus – by means of multi-purpose underwater pipes that would transport water, oil and natural gas. Feasibility reports for this project are being prepared, but potentially it holds great promise for Israel's standing in the region. If the pipeline could be extended to Israel's southern port city of Eilat at a later stage, Israel could eventually become the energy hub for India, China and Japan, providing a safer alternative to Persian Gulf oil exports. The implications of this project for Israel's international relations are obvious. Finally, Turkey offers comparatively cheap luxuries at close proximity to Israeli tourists, who have made this country their second favored destination after the US. This much needed outlet also helps Israelis overcome their trauma of encirclement. Considering the fact that the airspace to the east of Israel is closed to civilian flights by El Al, opting to fly Turkish Airlines via Istanbul has become a popular shortcut for many Israeli passengers who want to fly to destinations in Australia, Asia and the Far East.

To put it briefly, all these factors have overlapped to give Turkey considerable leverage over Israel. The new balance of power in the Middle East in the 2000s however, particularly the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement, diminished Turkey's enthusiasm for concerted action with Israel. Alerted to the loss of appetite in their strategic partner, Israeli governments have displayed enormous sensitivity towards Turkish interests in recent years. Turkey has used this influence to successfully nip a potential Israeli-Kurdish alliance in the bud and to persuade Israel to use its influence in the American Congress to battle repeated attempts by American Armenians to have the events of 1915 recognized as genocide.

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Turkey's Response to Operation Cast Lead

Israel and Turkey reached a new level of cooperation after Israel's evacuation of its settlements in the Gaza Strip in 2005. As a token of that positive mood, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs spent 2005, among other things of course, doing diplomatic spadework to arrange a meeting between the Israeli and Pakistani foreign ministers in İstanbul.² Likewise, Turkey took on a very active role in the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian tracks as the facilitator country and hit the headlines in May 2008 with the spectacular success of bringing Israeli and Syrian representatives together in Turkey in a series of mediated, indirect talks.³ As a matter of fact, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert paid a visit to Ankara just a week before Operation Cast Lead and participated in a diplomacy sprint which lasted until the small hours of the morning and nearly led to a meeting between himself and the Syrian foreign minister in Ankara.⁴

Israeli-Turkish bilateral relations were, however, tested severely in the first two months of 2009 in a very unexpected manner. The Turkish leadership, which had hosted the Israeli prime minister only a couple of days prior to the attacks, was taken completely by surprise by the breadth and forcefulness of the Israeli incursion into Gaza. The operation was Israel's most intense since conquering the little strip of land in May 1967. It resulted in an unprecedented number of Palestinian casualties, including hundreds of non-combatant civilians. Large sections of the strip lay in ruins and an estimated 50,000 Gazans were and still are displaced internally.

The official Turkish reaction to the events was swift. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister Erdoğan, Chairman of Parliament Köksal Toptan, and leaders of the opposition parties united in condemning the Israeli operation and calling for an immediate cease-fire. Prior to these events, Turkey had traditionally stayed away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and had tried to maintain a balanced approach. Nevertheless, Turkey always showed solidarity with the Palestinian people and their representatives. Amity between the Turkish and Palestinian peoples is rooted in the Turkish inclination to lend support to the weaker party in an international conflict, as well as in their common historical and religious ties. Actually, the very existence of that bond on the person to person level (although one is forced to admit that this has been a Turkish attitude toward the Palestinians rather than the other way round) has continuously shaped Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel and Palestinians as the most important factor in policy-making.

Particularly important this time, however, was the degree of anger displayed by the Turkish government, which could not simply be explained by reference to Turkey's traditional sympathy for the Palestinians. At a public meeting with mayoral candidates from the AKP ticket, which was broadcast live on several Turkish TV channels, PM Erdoğan condemned world media for being controlled by Israel and asked how Israel could still maintain its seat at the United Nations while flouting so many of the Security Council's decisions. He then went on to address the Israelis over the heads of their leadership by quoting the Sixth Commandment from the Decalogue both in English and in Hebrew.⁵ The fact that this must have been the first time a Turkish politician uttered a word in that language was in itself very symbolic and revealed how much PM Erdoğan was upset by the recent turn of events. He repeated his remarks to President Peres and the audience before storming off the stage at Davos.

Apparently, the official display of Turkish anger was due in large part to Israel's obliteration of the regional environment which had made possible Turkey's role as a mediator and facilitator between the Israelis and Syrians. Erdoğan did not mince words, openly declaring that he had lost confidence in PM Olmert as a partner for peace and that he felt personally betrayed by the fact that he was not informed of the impending Israeli operation during Olmert's visit to Ankara.⁶ Although those remarks targeted an outgoing prime minister, one rarely comes across such harsh statements among countries that define their relationship as a strategic partnership.

Nevertheless, all this looked calm and composed when compared to the outburst of hostility toward Israel in public rallies. The Turkish people, who rarely take to the streets, flocked to city squares all over Anatolia and protested against the Israeli operation in the strongest terms. Some of the protest meetings were organized by civil society institutions such as trade unions, professional organizations and bars, but the majority were inspired and carefully coordinated by the Anadolu Gençlik Derneği, an association indirectly linked with the Saadet Partisi (SP).⁷ Tens of thousands participated in one such rally in Ankara on January 19, 2009⁸ and another meeting in Diyarbakır drew a huge mass of people numbering 50,000 according to some estimates.⁹ Crowds in those meetings chanted pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel and, occasionally, anti-Semitic slogans, and demanded the unilateral abolition of all existing treaties between Turkey and Israel.

An Incensed Israel

At this point, it is impossible to know the extent to which Turkey's anger factored into Israeli policy-making and how much it mattered in the heat of the war.

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In the first two weeks of Operation Cast Lead, PM Olmert and Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni attempted to close their eyes to the Turkish criticism. Standing his ground, Olmert pointed out the challenge posed by the approaching local elections to the AKP government and instructed his cabinet ministers to refrain from confronting Turkey publicly, taking into consideration the importance of Israel's relationship with Turkey.¹⁰ In a

similar fashion, President Peres continued to stick to his well-established mantra of great respect for Turkey and its leadership, and desire to improve ties with Turkey in spite of the public humiliation he had suffered at Davos.

Still, the contours of a new Israeli response started to take shape as the tone of the discourse in Turkey grew even harsher. The new Israeli policy is evidently being conducted at two levels, the official and the informal. At the official level, the Israeli leadership is sending mixed signals of optimism for the future and displeasure with the current Turkish reaction. In his address to the leaders of major American Jewish organizations on February 15 2009, for example, Olmert clarified his position:

... regrettably [Operation Cast Lead] took place in the same week that I visited the Prime Minister of Turkey. The Prime Minister of Turkey was very unhappy and complaining how come I was visiting him on Monday and I didn't tell him that we are going to attack the Palestinians in Gaza on Saturday... . The reason I didn't tell him was twofold. One, is that on Monday I didn't know that we would attack on Saturday... . But I also said, quite frankly, I didn't call the President of the United States, my good friend George W. Bush, at that time, and say to him, I'm going to attack Gaza. I didn't call my good friends Gordon Brown or Nicolas Sarkozy or Angela Merkel. Why should I say to any prime minister what the military plans of the State of Israel are for defending its citizens?... I don't think that I had to do it and I was quite unhappy with the feelings that were expressed by the Turkish Prime Minister. We have good relations with Turkey... . we hope that the Prime Minister of Turkey will understand that there are certain constraints sometimes which forbid leaders of some nations from sharing the most sensitive secrets when there are secrets.¹¹

In other words, although Olmert still adopted a moderate approach to the problem, he did not include Erdoğan among his "good friends" and communicated

his own irritation at the Turkish discourse. Furthermore, Olmert's speech can be read as an example of the Israeli astonishment at why, as they seem to take it, PM Erdoğan attributes to himself greater authority in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than, let's say, the leaders of the Quartet countries. Israeli Foreign Minister Livni, likewise, expressed her government's desire to restore bilateral relations to the pre-2009 level, although she added that Israel expects Turkey to treat Israel with respect.¹² In the same vein, the President's Office in Israel confirmed that Peres called Erdoğan after the incident at Davos and underscored the significance of ties with Turkey for Israel, but it denied twice the validity of buzzing reports in the Turkish media that an apology had been extended as well.¹³

Adding another layer of complexity, the moderation that characterizes Israel's official response is not to be observed in other, informal signals coming from a variety of Israeli sources. To begin with, the Israeli population reacted sharply to PM Erdoğan's criticisms and to the Davos fracas. The immediate impact of that popular reaction could be observed in the tourism field. Until recently, Turkey had ranked as the most popular destination for Israeli tourists, especially for short-term vacations. Nearly 500,000 Israelis visited Turkey—mainly Antalya—last year, contributing an estimated \$300 million to the Turkish economy.¹⁴ All this has come tumbling down as a result of the bitterness in bilateral relations. The Israeli National Security Council issued a warning to all Israelis that "... there were risks of 'chance terror attacks'" in Turkey, the Philippines, Thailand and Uzbekistan, and asked all travelers to those countries to act with utmost care and precaution.¹⁵ One Israeli travel agency reported a fifty percent drop in reservations in January 2009 compared to the same month the previous year; another stated, "... we have suspended all the negotiations we had been conducting with hotels for the upcoming spring and summer in Turkey" until they could be sure that "... it is comfortable and safe there and that we are wanted in that country."¹⁶ Not all the downturn is individually motivated; actually most of the tour packages are reserved at the workplace in Israel by trade unions and workers' committees and the cancellations are usually due to the decisions taken collectively by those institutions. This is not to say that cancellations are part of a wider policy of official reaction to Turkey, but one cannot overlook that possibility either since Israeli policymakers must have been briefed on Turkey's economic vulnerability.

Much more serious than a setback in tourism, however, is the new, barely disguised Israeli threat to reconsider their position regarding the Armenian claims. The traditional Israeli approach to the events of 1915 between the Ottoman government and Ottoman Armenians has been one of silence and non-recognition.



Turkey cannot and need not refrain from criticizing Israeli operations in Gaza and the West Bank, especially when the toll on the civilian population is so high.

There are a number of Israeli reasons for not recognizing the 1915 events as genocide, but, among other factors, pressure from Turkey seems to have played a major role in the formulation of this uneasy foreign policy decision, which has been severely criticized by many Israeli intellectuals, academics and political parties.¹⁷ Israel's resolute stand, nevertheless, was tested in the recent crisis and Israeli policymakers did not hesitate to add that the genocide issue could be put on the table if Turkish discourse becomes more aggressive. Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, Majallie Whbee, the first Israeli Druze to rise so high in the political hierarchy, complained about Turkish critics, who argue that the Israeli operation in Gaza could be regarded as genocide, and warned explicitly that if such arguments persist, "we will then recognize the Armenian-related events as genocide."¹⁸ This grave threat, which, if carried out, could result in the severing of diplomatic ties between Israel and Turkey, is testimony to how seriously the current situation is being taken in Israel.

It cannot be mere coincidence that Deputy FM Whbee's statement nearly overlapped with an even more impudent, and one has to say disrespectful, diplomatic *coup de grâce* from unexpected quarters. Israel's Ground Forces Commander Ma-

jor General Avi Mizrahi dropped a proverbial bomb when he attacked Turkey as well as PM Erdoğan in person before an international audience in a lecture at the Tactical Command College on February 10, 2009. Responding to Erdoğan's harsh criticism of the Israeli operation,

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Mizrahi stated that Erdoğan "should first look in the mirror."¹⁹ Then the general managed to rub salt in three wounds at the same time: he took Turkey to task by reminding Erdoğan of "the massacre of Armenians, the suppression of the Kurds and the occupation of Northern Cyprus," implying that Turkey will not have the moral ground to preach to Israel until it deals with its own skeletons in the closet.²⁰ This statement marks the first instance of an unparalleled tone of official and popular reaction on the part of Turkey being matched by an equally strong Israeli rejoinder.

Turkey's immediate reaction was to summon the Israeli ambassador in Ankara, Gabi Levi, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ask for an explanation.²¹ The Turkish General Staff, too, issued a statement condemning Mizrahi's speech and demanding clarification as to whether Mizrahi spoke in the name of the IDF or not. The Israeli response crystallized in the following few days; Israeli Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi called his "... Turkish counterpart to apologize for the critical remarks made by ... Mizrahi ... and assured him that Mizrahi's remarks did not reflect the IDF's official position, and that Israel highly valued the strategic relationship it had forged over the years with the *Turkish military*."²² To those who are familiar with domestic politics in Israel and the relationship between the military and the civilian leadership, the notion of an Israeli general defying government policy on such a sensitive matter and censuring a foreign leader despite the wishes of elected politicians is hard to explain.²³ Israeli generals do address foreign policy issues in public, but only to complement their governments' stance on those issues, not to contradict it. Thus, although Mizrahi's criticisms were later disowned by the authorities, it is extremely unlikely that he spoke only his mind, and without prior authorization. In any case, what was said was said and Ankara had a taste of what was in store if bilateral relations should deteriorate further.

It is important to note at this point that there is a visible tendency in Israel to distinguish between the attitudes of the Turkish government and the Turkish military. Much of PM Erdoğan's dressing-down is attributed to his pro-Palestinian

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sentiments, the approaching Turkish local elections, and to Turkey's current interest in winning hearts and minds in the Arab-Muslim world. Israel seems to consider the Turkish military as its real partner in Turkey and pays more attention to the General Staff's line of thought. In an important article published in *Haaretz*, Middle East correspondent Zvi Bar'el re-

ported that he had met with a military member of the Turkish National Security Council at the height of the crisis and that his unnamed source conveyed displeasure with the Turkish government's policy vis-à-vis Israel thus:

You have to understand the historical aspect of our relations. We the Turks still have an Ottoman view of the region, whereby it's more natural for us to have ties with Israel than with the Arab countries. ... The Arabs' betrayal of the empire is rooted in our consciousness. The cultural rivalry with Iran is also part of our informal education. Israel and the Jews are our real allies. ... Someone in [Prime Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdogan's government thought that he could use this threat [to suspend military projects with Israel]. We explained to him that he can say whatever he wants and we the Turkish military establishment will do what we need to do.²⁴

The message of this interview is corroborated by the uninterrupted military cooperation between Turkey and Israel regardless of, and actually despite, the ongoing crisis among the politicians and the public at large.²⁵ Turkish Undersecretary for the Defense Industry, Murad Bayar, likewise, stated that military cooperation between the two countries is based on long-term projects and that those projects will be carried out undisturbed as long as Turkey and Israel share mutual interests.²⁶ Mehmet Ali Kışlalı, a Turkish journalist known for echoing the military's point of view, struck a similar note, expressing certainty that the damage done by Maj. Gen. Mizrahi's remarks was now contained as a result of contacts between Turkish and Israeli officials. He also added confidently that Mizrahi's and Erdoğan's remarks "would certainly not be permitted" to obstruct crucial ties in the field of security between two countries that need each other.²⁷

Conclusion: A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew²⁸

The sudden downturn in bilateral relations was welcomed by some commentators in Turkey²⁹ and has led to the expectation that the blow dealt was fatal and, indeed, that the strategic cooperation between Turkey and Israel would not be

able to recover from its rupture in the first months of 2009. However, we can now surmise that such expectations are unwarranted; on the contrary, we now observe the beginning of a new process of damage control and stabilization in diplomatic contacts, while military and security cooperation appear to have

maintained business as usual. A meeting between the Turkish and Israeli foreign ministers took place recently and was hailed as constructive.³⁰ At the same time, Turkish President Abdullah Gül is making an effort to dissipate ill-feelings on both sides. One of the prominent leaders of the Jewish-Turkish community, Jak Kamhi, traveled to Israel and met President Peres and FM Livni, undoubtedly acting upon official authorization by the Turkish president.³¹ Turkish dailies have carried reports of Gül's determination to pay a state visit to Israel before the end of 2009.³²

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Therefore, we may conclude that the strategic relationship between Turkey and Israel has proven amazingly resilient in spite of colossal changes in the socio-political and strategic map of the Middle East. Nevertheless, a realistic look at the basis for ongoing partnership is essential. Few of the factors that had made the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement possible in the early 1990s survive in the wake of 9/11. Today, Turkey's rapport with Israel continues to be pegged to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has been sour since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000. At a time when such structural factors constrain diplomatic ties, and common strategic interests are shrinking, the new basis for bilateral relations ought to be common values as much as common interests, if both Turkey and Israel are indeed committed to maintaining and extending cooperation in all fields. The obvious common values that both Turkey and Israel – alone – subscribe to in this region are multiparty democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech and press, and a strong civil society. Turkish-Israeli ties are likely to be restored if policymakers on both sides prepare a balance sheet now and try to learn from past mistakes in order to prevent future crises. The Turkish side can contribute its share to the revival and extension of cooperation, if the following issues receive more attention:

Turkey cannot and need not refrain from criticizing Israeli operations in Gaza and the West Bank, especially when the toll on the civilian population is so high, and Israelis have shown enormous absorptive capacity so far in this regard. However, the latest crisis has demonstrated that Israel has red lines as well. First, while

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PM Erdoğan's protest at Davos was not directed against President Peres personally, Israelis on the street were hurt by what they perceived as an affront to their head of state. Turks, who are at least as sensitive about national honor as Israelis, should have no difficulty in understanding this.³³ The incident was doubly unfortunate in that Shimon Peres happens to

lend the most sympathetic and attentive ear to Turkey among those in the current Israeli leadership. Secondly, Turkish politicians and diplomats can make a greater impact on their Israeli counterparts if they formulate their criticisms by making reference to international law and universal human rights. The current tendency to couch condemnation of Israeli actions in religious language is dangerous, because recourse to religious vocabulary is destined to undercut the traditional Turkish policy of differentiating between Jews and Israel as well as Israeli citizens and Israeli governments. Reading passages from the Hebrew Bible (*Lo tirtsah!*) rests on the mistaken but widespread assumption that all Israelis are religious people,³⁴ and can thus be moved by appealing to their religious sentiments.³⁵ For the majority of Israelis, who are actually secular, the Hebrew Bible is nothing more than the national saga of the ancient Israelites. Furthermore, extremist groups on the right and the left in Turkey might take their cue from the inappropriateness of formulating such religion-based criticisms, and refrain from holding Jewish Turks accountable for Israel's actions. The Turkish government and President Gül are already working hard to reassure this tiny community,³⁶ but more has to be done in order to prevent a new wave of migration from Turkey.

The AKP government made a grave mistake in the aftermath of the Israeli operation in letting the initiative pass into the hands of the SP and its youth branches, which fanned flames in the Turkish street. Turkish-Israeli ties should not be held hostage to the anti-Israeli, and occasionally anti-Semitic, discourse of minor parties and pressure groups on the extreme right and left of the Turkish political spectrum.

While Turkey's new interest in its relatively neglected Middle Eastern hinterland and its desire to mediate between conflicting parties in the region are commendable developments, Turkey's insistence on facilitating talks between Israelis and Palestinians, on the one hand, and Israelis and Syrians, on the other, should not take precedence over Turkey's bilateral relations with Israel. Israeli governments have so far acceded to Turkey's mediation attempts partly because they do

not want to rebuff a friendly country and partly with the hope that Turkey might indeed play a positive role as a result of the AKP government's current regional popularity. The Olmert Government expected two specific outcomes from the Turkish mediation team: first, Israel asked for Turkish help for the return of the remains of an Israeli spy, Eli Kohen, hanged in Damascus in 1965; second, Israel wished Turkey to negotiate a deal with Hamas for the release of the abducted Israeli soldier, Gil'ad Shalit, which would have been a most appreciated development. In spite of numerous attempts, however, the Turkish Foreign Ministry has not yet been able to meet those expectations. In another equivocal move, Turkey sent a professional investigation team when the entire Muslim world reacted sharply to Israeli excavations near the Mugrabi Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem in 2007. The report of the team was not released to the public, but leaks in the Turkish press alleged that Israel was responsible for damage done to the historical fabric of the Haram al-Sharif. In theory, Israel could 'fail to notice' Turkish criticism of its actions if Turkey could produce tangible benefits for Israel during the mediation process. But, realistically speaking, Turkey cannot continue to insist on a mediation role for itself while simultaneously maintaining a disparaging attitude toward Israel, particularly if it cannot deliver anything in return.³⁷

Turkey could have been more successful in the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Pakistani tracks if those channels of communication had not been leaked to the press prematurely

In its role as mediator and facilitator between conflicting parties, Turkey should consult with countries such as Norway, which have accumulated experience in those fields. Norwegian interlocutors' painstaking efforts in the making of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the first agreement between Israel and the PLO, should be a model for Turkey.³⁸ Turkey has a lot to learn from the Norwegian example in imposing total secrecy and anonymity for the negotiating parties until an agreement is reached and enough time is given to politicians to sell it to their public. Turkey could have been more successful in the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Pakistani tracks if those channels of communication had not been leaked to the press prematurely, out of short-term political calculations in domestic politics.

Turkey can possibly make the greatest contribution in the Israeli-Palestinian track. Even there, Turkish mediators should brace for lengthy discussions and many *culs-de-sac*. Instead of focusing on spectacular meetings between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, a role that is likely to be claimed by the US, Turkey can contribute to the dissemination of a peaceful environment by facilitating encounters between Israeli and Palestinian civil society institutions and opinion leaders on

Turkish soil. It is worth making use of Turkey's strong civil society to project soft power on both the Israelis and Palestinians. The influential Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), for example, initiated the Erez Industrial Zone Project, promising much-needed jobs to Gazans. Similar projects in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel are bound to bolster Turkey's stature in the region and lend credibility to Turkish mediation efforts.

Turkey's willingness to assume a mediation role between Israel, the Palestinians and Syria brings to mind the question of how prepared Turkish teams are for that task, which requires expertise in conflict resolution and intimate knowledge of historical and legal minutiae, not to speak of instilling confidence in the conflicting parties. Having instinctively adopted a more pro-Palestinian stance thus far, the AKP government is now slowly recognizing the problems posed by internal divisions among the Palestinians. It will soon be clear that the Fatah-Hamas division is only one of many. Fault lines separating Gazans from West Bankers, Palestinians in the occupied territories from Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, Palestinians in the occupied territories from Palestinian refugees in the Diaspora, and *hamulas* from one another will be activated when Israel and the Palestinians reach the final stage of peace negotiations. Are Turkish mediators ready to address that complex web of domestic fissures in Palestinian society? Are there any Turkish scholarly experts on Palestinians who could assist Turkish mediators?

A similar question arises regarding Turkey's perception of Israeli domestic politics. Here Turkey's contrast with Israel in the area of scholarship is striking. Dozens of Arabic, Persian and Turkish speaking Israeli academics and area specialists at Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Ben-Gurion Universities, as well as the Hebrew University of Jerusalem follow the unfolding events in Middle Eastern countries on a daily basis and use those primary documents to produce first-rate scholarly works. While some of those studies are entirely academic, it is only natural that part of the motivation for this interest is rooted in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the desire of Israeli policymakers to receive updated information on the behavior of their political adversaries in the region. What is truly shocking is that Israel's interest in the socio-cultural, economic and political life in its Arab and Muslim neighbors is not reciprocated at all, even for the sake of learning more about one's current enemy. Jewish and Israeli studies as academic fields of inquiry do not exist in the Arab-Muslim Middle East.³⁹ News from Israel and the Jewish world trickle down to Arab-Muslim decision-makers and societies through the lenses of highly opinionated diplomats, media reporters and Israel-illiterate think-tanks. In the absence of an academic, not necessarily objective but at least independent,

approach toward Israel, Arab and Muslim decision-makers usually miscalculate their moves, while public opinion is easily manipulated and fed distorted views. Unfortunately, Turkey is no exception to this sad state of affairs. At the moment, Turkey does not have even one scholarly expert on modern Israel, who can speak and read Hebrew, who spends even part of the year in Israel to make contacts with opinion leaders there, and who has an intimate knowledge of Israeli economy, literature, business community or academia. Objective and scholarly works on Jews and Israel are a rarity in the Turkish language, except for those translated from other languages. It is impossible to find Hebrew books in Turkish libraries.⁴⁰ This situation must change if Turkey is indeed determined to pursue an active role in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. A new generation of Ph.D. students should be encouraged to specialize on Israel by providing them with scholarships under the auspices of the Board of Higher Education or the Ministry of Education. Israel can also be asked, and will surely be willing, to contribute to this process by establishing a cultural center and a Hebrew library in Turkey. In the 1990s, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel donated a special fund to Tel Aviv University to support Turkish studies in Israel. Now, Turkey can request a similar gesture from Israel – the foundation of an inter-university agency – to underwrite the costs of Jewish and Israeli studies in Turkey.

Whereas the recent crisis between Turkey and Israel led many observers to believe that the strategic partnership between the two countries has been dealt a fatal blow, it is now obvious that damage done is less than anticipated. Contacts between diplomats and ministers are geared towards damage control at the moment and the former level of cordiality should not be expected to return back in the short run. In a way, the crisis over Gaza has exposed the Achilles's heel for this bilateral relationship; Turkish governments will always feel embarrassed of their ties with Israel as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be rescued from the abyss to which it has descended. If President Obama can indeed override the Netanyahu government's obstinacy and carry out his vision of a two-state solution to problem, Turkey and Israel could expand their partnership to become a model for the entire region.

Endnotes

1. The classical work on the state of Israel's international legitimacy is Aaron S. Klieman, *Israel and the World after 40 Years* (Washington, DC: Pergamon, 1989).

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5. "Lo tir'tsach (Öldürmeyeceksin)," *Hürriyet*, 17 January 2009.
6. "Erdoğan İsrail Başbakanı'na Sert Çıktı," *Sabah*, 18 February 2009.
7. SP is the successor to the former *Refah Partisi* (The Welfare Party) and is still in the orbit of the former party chairman Necmettin Erbakan.
8. <www.agd.org.tr/99_ANKARA-DA-MUHTESEM-MITING.htm>, accessed on 1 March 2009.
9. "Diyarbakır'da 50 Bin Kişi İsrail'i Protesto Etti," *Hürriyet*, 4 January 2009. The Diyarbakır meeting was organized by the *Mustazaf-Der*, a new and very effective local grassroots movement with Kurdish and Islamic overtones.
10. "Başbakan Erdoğan İsrail'i Karıştırdı," *Bugün*, 3 February 2009.
11. <www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches%20by%20Israeli%20leaders/2009/Address_PM_Olmert_Conference_Presidents_15-Feb-2009.htm>, accessed on 2 March 2009.
12. "İsrail: Türkiye Bize Saygılı Olsun," *Radikal*, 1 February 2009.
13. Although both sides cannot seem to agree on the contents of that conversation, Peres called Erdoğan after their clash at Davos expressed those cordial feelings to him in person. Barak Ravid and Yoav Stern, "Israel: Erdogan's Davos Behavior May Ruin Turkey's EU Chances," *Haaretz*, 1 February 2009.
14. Irit Rosenblum and Zohar Blumenkrantz, "Israeli Tourists Stay Away from Turkey after Peres Row with Erdogan," *Haaretz*, 1 February 2009.
15. "Pessah Warning: Stay Away from Sinai and Other Hot Spots," *Jerusalem Post Online Edition*, 8 March 2009.
16. Rosenblum and Blumenkrantz, "Israeli Tourists."
17. Academics associated with Israel's foremost Holocaust research institution, the *Yad Vashem*, are among the critics of the Israeli policy. Especially Yair Auran's books, accusing Israel for being indifferent to genocides elsewhere, made an impact on the public opinion in Israel; see Yair Auran, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000); idem., *Ha-banaliyut shel ha-adishut: yahas ha-yishuv ha-yehudi be-Erets Yisra'el ve-ha-tenu'ah ha-tsiyonit le-retsah ha-am ha-Armeni* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1995).
18. Sean Gannon, "Genocide by Any International Standard," *Jerusalem Post Online Edition*, 12 February 2009. The editorial article in *Haaretz* on 16 February 2009 disapproved of the Foreign Ministry's threat and invited Israeli politicians to hold the higher moral ground: "The debate is not whether to define the killing of Armenians as genocide or a holocaust. This is a moral issue that obligates us to re-examine history and offer a value-based judgment... If Israel seeks to alter its stance on the question of the murder of the Armenians, it would be wise to do so at a more appropriate time, from a worthy position of morality and not as a way to make threats. It shouldn't happen whenever a disagreement erupts with Turkey." See, "A Cynical Use of Morality," *Haaretz*, 16 February 2009; and "Shimush tsini be-musar," *Haaretz*, 16 February 2009.
19. Herb Keinon, "Turkey Irked by IDF General's Remarks," *Jerusalem Post Online Edition*, 14 February 2009.

20. Keinon, "Turkey Irked by IDF General's Remarks,"
21. Barak Ravid and Yossi Melman, "Shagrir Yisra'el be-Ankara zuman le-sihat havharah be-ekvot divrei ha-aluf Avi Mizrahi," *Haaretz*, 14 February 2009.
22. Yaakov Katz, "IDF Head 'Sorry' General Slammed Turks," *Jerusalem Post Online Edition*, 19 February 2009. Italics mine. For Israeli responses to Maj. Gen. Mizrahi, see Benni Ziffer, "Al ha-miflas ha-inteligentsiyah shel aluf Avi Mizrahi," *Haaretz*, 16 February 2009; and Zvi Bar'el, "Ha-aluf Mizrahi garar gam et tsava Turkiyah le-mashber ha-yahasim she-notsar be-ekvot mivtsa oferet yetsukah be-Azah," *Haaretz*, 15 February 2009.
23. Zeev Schiff, *A History of the Israeli Army (1870-1974)* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974), 268-279; Yoram Peri, *Between Battles and Ballots: Israeli Military in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-18; Martin van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 108-109.
24. Zvi Bar'el, "Why We Need Turkey," *Haaretz*, 22 February 2009.
25. Zvi Bar'el, "Lamrot ha-milhamah ha-milulit bein Yisra'el le-Turkiyah, ha-yahasim ha-mediniim ve-ha-tsva'im bein shtei ha-medinot shavirim pahot me-ha-nire la-ayin," *Haaretz*, 21 February 2009.
26. "İsrail ile Problemimiz Yok," *Yeni Şafak*, 23 February 2009.
27. Mehmet Ali Kışlalı, "Asker ve İsrail," *Radikal*, 21 February 2009.
28. The phrase is from Ecclesiastes 3:7.
29. Fehmi Kuru, "İsrail Nereye Gidiyor?," *Yeni Şafak*, 20 February 2009; Tamer Korkmaz, "Davos'da Zalimin Suratına Hakikati Haykırmak," *Yeni Şafak*, 1 February 2009; Ali Bulaç, "Davos'ta Batı'nın Defosu," *Zaman*, 31 January 2009.
30. "Babacan ve Livni Bir Araya Geldi: Davos'tan Sonra İlk Buluşma," *Şalom*, 11 March 2009.
31. "İşadamı Jak Kamhi Peres İle Görüştü," *Sabah*, 19 February 2009.
32. "Cumhurbaşkanı Gül İsrail'e Gidecek," *Milliyet*, 27 February 2009.
33. For an extreme case of insensitivity, see Tamer Korkmaz, "Şu İşe Bakın," *Yeni Şafak*, 22 February 2009.
34. The electoral success of Avigdor Lieberman's party, *Yisrael Beiteniu*, for example has been read, by and large through the contorted lenses of Turkish politics, as the worrisome rise of the religious right-wing in Israel. What many Turkish commentators missed, however, was that *Yisrael Beiteniu* is mainly a party of Russian immigrants and has run a militantly secularist election campaign. Lieberman even managed to pressure Binyamin Netanyahu to leave all religious parties out of the government as part of the coalition agreement. *Shas*, which joined the government, may be considered an exception, but in that case, too, the religious ideology of the party is balanced by its ethnic vote.
35. PM Erdoğan's former spokesperson and now *Radikal* columnist, Akif Beki, recently claimed that "this warning to the Children of Israel [*İsrailoğulları*] in the language of their faith certainly had a great impact on them." Akif Beki, "CHP'ye Üçüncü Emir!," *Radikal*, 11 February 2009. As an observer of Israeli domestic politics on an almost daily basis, I am yet to come across one single example of that great impact.
36. "Çankaya'da Antisemitizm Hassasiyeti," *Şalom*, 4 March 2009; interview with Silvio Ovadya, "Anayasa ve Demokrasi Yeter Bize," *Milliyet*, 2 February 2009.
37. As a matter of fact, an Israeli specialist on Turkey, Dr. Anat Lapidot-Firilla, dubbed Turkish willingness for mediation in the Middle East "The Turkish man's burden", finding a Kiplingesque

flavor in the new trend in Turkish foreign policy; see Anat Lapidot-Firilla, “What is behind Turkey’s Antagonism to Israel?,” *Haaretz*, 21 February 2009.

38. The best account of the Oslo process can be found in David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government’s Road to Oslo* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996).

39. The deplorable state of Israeli studies in the Arab world is described in a new book by Hassan A. Barari, *Israelism: Arab Scholarship on Israel, a Critical Assessment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2009).

40. To the best of my knowledge, I am the proud owner of the largest library of Hebrew books in Ankara, 46 volumes altogether!